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RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO PRIORITY 1178
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4767
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN PRIORITY 1879
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: VIEW FROM SANTIAGO: FERNANDEZ CAMPAIGN FACES
CHALLENGE

REF: A. 07 SD 0233 (VARGAS WINS NOMINATION)

- [1](#)B. 07 SD 0329 (VARGAS' POLITICAL DIRECTOR)
- [1](#)C. 07 SD 0348 (VARGAS FOREIGN POLICY)
- [1](#)D. 07 SD 0590 (FERNANDEZ TO RUN)
- [1](#)E. 07 SD 0685 (FERNANDEZ DEFENDS RE-ELECTION)
- [1](#)F. 07 SD 0846 (PLD DIVIDED)
- [1](#)G. 07 SD 1017 (VARGAS WITH DIPLOMATIC CORPS)
- [1](#)H. 07 SD 1078 (FERNANDEZ WINS PRIMARY)
- [1](#)I. 07 SD 1691 (CAMPAIGN TEAMS)
- [1](#)J. 07 SD 2366 (ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW)
- [1](#)K. 07 SD 2568 (VARGAS WITH POLOFFS)
- [1](#)L. SD 0039 (RHETORIC HEATS UP)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Roland W. Bullen, Reasons 1.4(b), (d)

[1](#)1. (U) On January 11 ECOPOLCOUNS and POLOFF visited Santiago, the Dominican Republic's second largest city, to discuss the presidential election campaign. Santiago is the capital of a province of the same name, as well as the hub of the Cibao, a 14-province region with a record of successful private sector development in sectors such as agrobusiness and free trade zone (FTZ) manufacturing.

The PRSC

[1](#)2. (SBU) EMBOFFs met with Victor Garcia Sued, the Secretary General of the Mayor's Office, and asked him how the Mayor, Jose Enrique Sued (the two are cousins), was able to win office as a member of the PRSC party despite the PLD party landslide in 2006. Garcia said that the Mayor had a strong record of working hard and getting things done for the city.

[1](#)3. (C) Regarding this year's presidential election, Garcia said that the PRSC planned to utilize Sued's popularity to take maximum advantage of the vulnerability of President Fernandez's PLD, not just in Santiago, but in the remainder of the Cibao region. Sued is actively campaigning for PRSC presidential candidate Amable Aristy Castro and is the front-runner in the competition for the vice presidential nomination. Garcia attributed the PLD's problems in the area to three factors:

-- The concentration of public works spending in Santo Domingo, which he claims now outpaces Santiago by a factor of 100 to 3;
-- Job losses in the free trade zones, which are hurting the ruling PLD despite the fact that the private sector should shoulder the blame for not having diversified away from textile manufacturing; and
-- The centralization of decision making within political parties, who have allowed power to sit with a small group of leaders in Santo Domingo.

The PRD

14. (C) EMBOFFs met with Jose Ulises Rodriguez, a Congressman and chief of PRD presidential candidate Vargas Maldonado's election campaign in Santiago. Like Garcia, Rodriguez believes that the PLD is vulnerable in the Cibao. He argued that Fernandez is well behind in the polls in the region, in large part because he was late in recognizing the political impact of the job losses in the FTZs. Rodriguez cited what he said were comments by the President, shortly after taking office, describing the FTZs as an "outdated" economic model. Only after the PLD's poll numbers fell, according to the Congressman, did Fernandez visit the area and proclaim that the FTZs "have a future."

15. (C) Rodriguez described another PLD weakness in the Santiago area, the Fernandez's administration's "mishandling" of Tropical Storms Noel and Olga. The Congressman argued that the destruction caused by the release of water from the Taveras Dam -- which occurred at 3:00 a.m. and with little warning -- could have been avoided had the government named a qualified official to run the national hydrological authority (INDRHI). Instead, he alleged, Fernandez chose Hector

Rodriguez Pimentel -- a member of the opposition and a man without the proper engineering background to run INDRHI -- because he wanted to bring Rodriguez Pimentel and his supporters into the governing coalition. (Note: Rodriguez Pimentel is a chemical engineer.)

16. (C) The Congressman also believes that the number of deaths from the Taveras incident have been underestimated considerably, with undocumented workers who died not having been counted. Finally, Rodriguez was critical of the distribution of aid after the tropical storms, saying that supporters of the ruling party received disproportionately more assistance.

17. (C) When EMBOFFs stated the U.S. interest in a free and fair election, Rodriguez turned to his PRD colleague, Julio Cesar Sepulveda, for a reply. Sepulveda said his party was concerned about the lack of independence of the individuals chosen to monitor voting stations. He also claimed that Franklin Almeyda, the PLD's Minister of Interior and Police, is organizing groups of party supporters to intimidate voters during the campaign. This is a concern to Sepulveda because, he claimed, Almeyda has been involved with this activity in the past, e.g. in the 1970s when he organized violent leftist protests.

The PLD

18. (C) EMBOFFs met with Ramon Ventura Camejo, chief of President Fernandez's election campaign in Santiago and the Director of the National Office for Administration and Personnel (ONAP). Ventura acknowledged the challenges facing the PLD in the Cibao, stating that while the PLD was leading in the polls throughout the country, its advantage in the Santiago area was the smallest of any region. (Note: Ventura seemed reluctant to discuss what many see as the PLD's poor election prospects in the Cibao. He tended to give short answers to our questions about regional election issues, instead focusing on his work as the national head of ONAP. He emphasized a common PLD line that the best thing they can do to win the campaign is to run the government well until

the election.)

Participacion Ciudadana

19. (SBU) Having heard Sepulveda's comments about voter intimidation, we asked a leading NGO what the prospects were for election related violence. Alfredo Matias and Newton Lopez, the outgoing and incoming Coordinators of the Santiago office of the Participacion Ciudadana, said that violence during campaigns had gone down in recent years. They gave much of the credit for this to the "Ethical Pacts" that the major parties had signed before each election since 1998. The Pacts include, among other clauses, the agreement to not hold competing rallies in the same city on the same day. Regarding the PRD's allegation that supporters of the ruling party received more aid after the tropical storms, Matias and Lopez said that there was a great deal of talk to that effect in Santiago, but that they had no hard evidence to prove the wrongdoing.

Comment

10. (C) Given Fernandez's 5-10 percent lead nationally, it was striking to see his PLD party on the defensive in the Cibao. We were concerned, though not surprised, to hear reports that supporters of the ruling party received more aid after the tropical storms -- and some polls show the PLD having gained ground since Noel and Olga. Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how well the opposition can take advantage of the ruling party's vulnerability, and whether they will be able to capture not just Santiago, but also the other 13 provinces in the Cibao.

(U) This report and additional information can be found on

Embassy Santo Domingo's SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/>
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